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Cap Takes a Hard Line

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, who once aspired to be Secretary of State, often tries to put his own spin on foreign policy. Last week he was at it again, waging a rear-guard action against accommodation with the Soviet Union.

His verbal war on Moscow started with a television interview in which he spoke indignantly, but inaccurately, about an encounter between U.S. and Soviet soldiers in East Germany. On Sept. 8, he said, a Soviet truck "deliberately" bumped an American patrol car. Then the Soviets held a G.I. for nine hours, treating him roughly. The Soviets "generally behaved in the same way that they did in the incident in which Major [Arthur] Nicholson was killed," Weinberger said, recalling the shooting of an American liaison officer by a Soviet sentry in East Germany on March 24.

In fact, two Americans were improperly detained this time after their car became entangled in barbed wire. But they were released without harm when a Soviet officer arrived. After Weinberger spoke, other officials in Washington toned down his account. A senior American officer in West Germany told TIME, "It was not a hostile situation and involved rather reasonable behavior on both sides."

At midweek, Weinberger and Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle appeared in the Pentagon briefing room. They stood before an array of charts and photographs, including ones of Leonid Smirnov, director of the Soviet Military Industrial Commission, and KGB Boss Victor Chebrikov. The rogues' gallery provided an atmospheric backdrop for distribution of a 34-page study on how the Soviets have advanced 5,000 of their research projects with technical information bought, stolen or acquired legally in the West.

The new report added fresh detail about Moscow's global intelligence vacuum cleaner. For instance, espionage allowed the Soviets to copy the "look-down, shoot-down" radar capability of the F-18, saving an estimated five years and $55 million in research. Moscow also pirated the design for a computer used in cruise missiles. But the Pentagon study itself pointed out that about 90% of the intellectual booty comes from open sources rather than spying. Weinberger proposed no new statutes or regulations to reduce the haul.

He partly remedied that next day at a press conference, where he suggested fewer Soviets be allowed in the West. "We have to bear in mind," he said, "that the Soviets don't send people to countries like the U.S. unless they are fully equipped, fully trained and either part of the KGB or might just as well be." Weinberger endorsed Perle's view that the number of Soviet officials in the U.S. should be no greater than the number of Americans in the U.S.S.R. (Right now the Soviets have nearly four times as many, 980 to 260.) Weinberger also defended the crux of his initial statement on the East German incident and repeated his opposition to any U.S. concessions in arms-control negotiations. In giving Nicholson a posthumous promotion, Weinberger said the Soviets' "ruthlessness" should be a warning for anyone "willing to give [them] the benefit of the doubt."

Why this tough talk at so delicate a moment in Soviet-American relations? Perle, among the most hawkish members of the Administration, denied any effort "to throw cold water on the summit." But some Administration officials clearly thought otherwise. Secretary of State George Shultz went so far as to complain inside the official family about Weinberger's rhetorical offensive. The Defense Secretary showed no sign of backing off. He even postponed an upcoming trip to Asia, an aide explained, so he could "position himself to remain active in the walk-up to Geneva."

Weinberger describing Moscow's intelligence vacuum cleaner